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ABSTRACT

This practicum describes the development of a weekly peer group program for students who were at risk for truancy status. Participants were culturally diverse middle school students from low to middle class families. Interviews were conducted to determine reasons for missing school. Responses included illness, lack of motivation mostly from academic failure, lack of connectedness to school, and waking up late. An intervention program included the following components: (a) bi-weekly group meetings during homeroom; (b) student contract daily attendance sheets; (c) discussion sessions regarding issues of non-school attendance and goal setting for academic achievement; and (d) on-going contact with parent and community liaison personnel. Success measures were reported by comparing baseline attendance data across 10 weeks of program implementation. An increase in motivation to attend school was determined by administing a post questionnaire. Data analysis revealed that use of peer group sessions resulting in reduction of excused absences for all students involved. Parents' participation in reporting their child's absense was reported as being responsive and supportive. (Contains 24 references and five appendixes.) (Author/JDM)

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ED 435 875

A Behavioral Peer Group Approach to Combat Truancy in the Middle School

by
Rose Kreps
Cluster 90

A Practicum I Report Presented to
the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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APPROVAL PAGE

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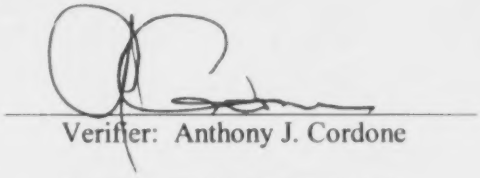

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Abstract

A Behavioral Group Approach to Combat Truancy in the Middle School. Kreps, Rose A., 1999: Practicum Report, Nova Southeastern University, Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies. School Psychologist/Multidisciplinary Team/Special Education/Inservice Training/Supervision.

A weekly peer group behavioral approach with students who were at risk for truancy status was developed. The group consisted of 17 culturally diverse middle school students, grades six, seven, and eight from low to middle class families. Student interviews revealed their reasons for missing school. Responses included illness, the lack of motivation coming to school, mostly due to academic failure, lack of connectedness to school, and waking up late.

The intervention program included the following components: (a) bi-weekly group meetings during homeroom, (b) student contract daily attendance sheets, (c) discussion sessions regarding issues of non-school attendance and goal setting for academic achievement, and (d) on-going contact with parent and community laison personnel.

Success was measured by comparing baseline attendance data across 10 weeks of program implementation. Increase in motivation to attend school was determined by administration of post questionnaire. Analysis of the data revealed that the use of peer group sessions resulted in a reduction of unexcused absences for all students involved. A contingency program enhanced their motivation for attending school. Intervention coupled with the Truancy Response Team caseworker achieved positive results. Parental response in reporting their child's absence has been supportive and more frequent.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Description of Community

This writer's community consisted of a shoreline that extends 11 square miles located in the southeast portion of its state. The community had a memorable historic past for its shoreline role in the American Revolution. It became a city in 1921 and had a population of approximately 54,000 with a student population of approximately 7,300. The tax base income was derived from residential property (41%) and commercial property (13%) of which the largest tax contributor was the world headquarters for a pharmaceutical company.

This writer's work setting evolved from a rural, predominately white, middle to upper middle income community to a low to middle income status that carried many of the socioeconomic issues of a neighboring inner city community. The cultural diversity and ethnic composition of the city changed from a minority population of 18% to 40% with representations of 25% Black, 12% Hispanic and 3% Other.

Over the past three decades, the city had experienced a period of growth. Large parcels of land were quickly developed in the 1960's to accommodate the housing market demand (including tenant/tact housing). The need for additional school facilities was required to relieve the overcrowded conditions of the student population within the district. After an extensive assessment of the population growth, the Board of Education proposed and received approval to construct a new high school in 1963 and an additional middle school in 1969. The two decades that followed required systemic and organizational restructuring including the closing of two buildings and a realignment of the school district to accommodate racial balance within the changing community.

The organization provided educational services for grades six, seven, and eight for a current population of 820 students, of which 53% were bused. The school population mirrored that of a community that was highly transit and of low socio-economic status (approximately 28% qualify for assistance programs). Many of the students moved to the city from neighboring inner city districts and were in need of academic remediation or special services.

Due to ongoing concern about the need for comprehensive response to social problems affecting the community, there was strong interagency collaboration that led to school-based programs and assistance from the community agencies. Two programs specifically for the middle school and active in the work setting were Project Teen Community, the delinquency prevention team, and the DARE Program which was established through the Youth Service Bureau by Drugs Don't Work!

Writer's Work Setting

The mission statement of the school was a holistic one which addressed not only student needs, but also included the concerns of parents, community, and professional staff. The vision of the school was one that provided an opportunity for the student to explore life long learning skills, kindle intellectual interest, individual creativity, and independent study.

Social and cultural factors that made the school unique was the cultural diversity in relation to students and teachers. Because of this diversity, there were many multi-ethnic programs that local universities and staff members became involved in with students.

The population within the organization consisted of a staff of 60 teachers and was an established group of multi-cultural professionals who gave a tremendous amount of energy and support to the students and programmatic needs. Over 60% of the teachers were actively involved in research that included site visits, piloting, and implementation of the block schedule team concept which was the current method of instruction at the middle school level. The student body served was approximately 820 students and composed of grades six, seven, and eight. The school was racially balanced according to state guidelines, which stated that a minority representation cannot exceed 56.1% or no less than 26.41% within a given school. Due to the transient nature of a significant proportion of the population, approximately 20% of the students who began school each year were new to the community.

Writer's Role

This writer's role was that of guidance counselor and laison to the Project Teen Community Board. She had been a middle school guidance counselor for four years within the same school district. Previously, she was a special education teacher for upper elementary grades for 11years. The writer's responsibilities as they applied to the practicum problem involved truancy, prevention, intervention, and referrals to community agencies. Her role was to provide strategies to parents and staff to encourage students at risk to attend school. Updates from teachers on student progress were reviewed and consistent communication with parent, student, and community agencies involved with truancy were vital roles for the writer.

Chapter II: Study of the Problem

Problem Statement

The problem solved in this practicum was the reduction of unexcused absences and its positive effect on academic achievement among middle school students.

Problem Description

According to data from the writer's school district, there was an increase in poor school attendance, with 10% of the population being absent on any given day. Parents did not take responsibility by reporting absences and/or allowing students to stay home without legitimate reasons. Strategies to improve attendance were ineffective since nonattendance was increasing. By eighth grade, approximately 40% of the students did not meet state goals for academic achievement (McMahon & Pruett, 1998). The community felt the effects of the change in economic status and the ongoing rise in socioeconomic issues. In particular, family issues seemed to emerge as a critical factor in perpetuation of the problem. Lack of parental monitoring, a sense of powerlessness from the parents, financial stress, and/or chronic mental illness in a parent were contributing factors as an isolated, unnecessary absence from school evolved into chronic truancy. Parents were ultimately responsible for ensuring their children attend school and children out of school were often difficult to engage in intervention designed to improve attendance. This brought about the need for family oriented and home based assessment and intervention. Newsletters to parents about the importance of regular school attendance were not enough.

Another reason why the problem had not been solved concerned legalities within the writer's state. A 1993 statute required that school systems initiate legal sanctions when students missed 20 or more school days without a valid excuse (Garry, 1996). As a result the governor had recently organized a special advisory on truancy. A statewide Truancy Task Group was organized to begin exploring potential solutions to the problem. However, although excessive absence from school was reported to the juvenile court system, many professionals believed that initiation of legal sanctions could be avoided were there sufficient resources within school systems to respond immediately to early signs of poor school attendance. Early resources were what this writer's work setting fell short of and then began to establish with help from community agencies.

Another difficulty was the lack of academic achievement that resulted from poor attendance. Typically students who had difficulty attending school also lacked the motivation that was needed to maintain academic standards. Making up missed assignments was almost unheard of, which directly contributed to their lack of success. Making up homework entailed staying after school to make up tests or specific assignments that could not be completed at home. If and when they did come to school, the last thing the students wanted to do was to stay after school. It was found that students who did not attend school also lacked the motivation to stay after school even for recreational activities. They needed a sense of belonging which permeated into all areas.

Problem Documentation

The first piece of evidence that the problem existed were the attendance records of the students within the first month of school, at least 20 students would have reached

truancy status with four unexcused absences. Within the school setting, daily attendance records were kept on over 800 students whether they were absent excused, absent unexcused, or truant. This was done by calling the home of absent students whose parents did not call them in as absent, which were approximately 40 parents throughout the year. The data collection methods included records recorded in data base and counselor files.

The second pieces of evidence were the parent phone calls. The source was the parent or legal guardian of the student. The data collection used was the phone contact made by the counselor to the parent when a student reached four unexcused absences in a month or 10 unexcused absences from school in any school year since, as stated in the statutes, a student absent under those circumstances was considered a truant.

The third piece of evidence were interviews with students and counselor who had accumulated four unexcused absences in one month or 10 throughout the year. The sources for the information were the students. The data collection used were interviews with 15 of 20 truant students which indicated the lack of desire to come to school when asked open-ended questions by their guidance counselor (see Appendix A).

The fourth piece of evidence were the mid-term progress reports and report cards. The source of the information came from the classroom teacher. The data collection used were the mid-term reports, issued every five weeks between report cards, four times a year and report cards that were issued quarterly indicating 12 of 20 students who were failing at least two or more academic subjects due to attendance.

The last pieces of evidence were the student questionnaires (see Appendix B) given by the counselor but completed independently by the students. The source of the information came from the students. The data collection used was an attitude toward

school questionnaire that indicated areas of concern that reflected a sense of belonging. It was a questionnaire devised by this writer as an indicator of attitudes toward school, teachers, and peers. Questions reflected issues expressed by students with poor school attendance.

Causative Analysis

The major cause of unexcused absences within this writer's work setting was a result of the attendance procedures and policies that were in place. By reviewing the current Board of Education attendance policy, it was clear that there was room for misinterpretation on the part of the parent. The middle school policy was not as stringent as the high school's, where students lost credit for missed time without a doctor's note, so it was not looked upon as serious by some parents. The attendance policy was lenient for elementary and middle school students which had enabled them to develop poor habits of school attendance. The writer further investigated this cause by interviewing the clerk responsible to call the home of absent students. The result of the interview revealed that many students were recorded as absent/unexcused because parents failed to call the school according to the attendance policy which stated that any time a child was out from school, their absence must be reported by parent or guardian. Meetings with teachers indicated a general consensus that the school's attendance policy needed to have stricter criteria for excused absences. It was very simple for parents to call their child in sick when a doctor's note was not required and there was no penalty academically, except for the assignments that were missed and needed to be made up. Many times the work was not made up and the student began to fall behind and eventually experience failure.

A second cause of poor school attendance was the sense of social isolation and failure the students who refused to come to school experienced. The strategies used to determine the possible cause were interviews and questionnaires of 20 students at-risk of truancy status. At-risk of truancy status indicated that they had at least four unexcused absences within a month. Through parent and teacher contact, students were referred to their guidance counselor and reasons for absence and student progress were discussed. The result of interview sessions with the students revealed feelings of non-connectedness to school due to social isolation and/or academic failure.

Later learned as a result of a questionnaire given during a group session, the majority of the students indicated that they woke up late and that was their reason for not attending school. If they woke up late there was no way for them to get transportation to school. Many times their parents were already at work or did not have a car available to bring them to school. Some of the students indicated the need for an alarm clock or not feeling well as the reason for waking up late.

A final cause of unexcused absences within the writer's work setting was the limited amount of prevention/intervention strategies. To determine this possible cause, the writer became a member of the school-based early intervention team initiated by the city and community due to the lack of early intervention strategies in the writer's work setting and the ongoing rise in social problems within the community. This writer further investigated the cause by becoming a board member for Project Teen Community and attended the state's Truancy Task Group monthly meetings which stated concern that the current legislation was not being enforced. Parents and children were not fully aware of the legalities behind unexcused absences.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

As early as the 1800's, society recognized the link between truancy and delinquency. Since then, it had been noted by the courts that it was seldom a juvenile offender that did not come from parents who needed to be more responsible in making their child attend school. In a 1979 study of 258 inmates, 78% showed truancy as the first entry on their arrest records (Gavin, 1996).

In the past, truancy was considered to be a school-based problem so a large amount of research had been conducted in that area. In response to national dropout rates, middle school truancy prevention/intervention programs were being implemented throughout many school systems. Studies also examined contracting as a truancy reducer. Studies revealed that contingency contracting had been effective because it was economical, it was time efficient once the initial contract was made, and monitoring the contract was easy. (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). When school refusal behavior was associated with the attainment of tangible rewards, an effective approach was having the adolescent participate in choosing the rewards they would receive for school attendance (Lee & Miltenberger, 1996). A variety of behavioral approaches had been employed to reduce truancy. Successful interventions for individuals or groups generally included rewards designed to enhance the reinforcing value of school attendance.

Truancy may be a precursor to delinquent and criminal behavior and eventually cost society a high price to pay (Garry, 1996). The costs to society also were considerable and occurred in at least seven areas: national income, tax revenues, increased demand for publicly supported social services, increased crime, reduced

political participation, reduced intergenerational mobility, and lower health rates (Oakland, 1992).

All initiatives stated in research emphasized the need to intensively monitor, counsel and strengthen the families and communities of truant and delinquent behavior and recognized that parents must be involved and held responsible for the children's school attendance (Kearney & Silverman, 1995). Attendance has been noted to improve through parental and child accountability. Notification letters informing parents and truant children of their obligations under compulsory education laws and advising them that they may be prosecuted for failing to comply with these laws has been an effective strategy (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Students who attended school regularly performed better academically than their truant peers; this fact was the underlying reason for the state attendance policy. Truancy also took money away from the education of the children and millions were lost every year in state funds through unexcused absences. The ultimate goal of truancy programs was to involve parents with keeping kids in school and reducing the opportunities for them to get into trouble (Wagley, 1995). Parenting classes were an integral component of any school's efforts to resolve the truancy problem. Schools and communities needed to work together to involve parents in getting their children to school. Parents were often blamed for the fact that their children were truant, but often the parents wanted their children to attend school but did not know how to get them to do that (Johns & Keenan, 1997).

In an effort to more effectively deal with the truant child, many systems were combining efforts to implement a uniform legal process that began in juvenile justice

courts (Johnson, 1998). An example of this was the establishment of a Truancy Unit which consisted of juvenile justice personnel, Department of Children and Families, and community based agencies who utilized a case management approach to improve school attendance and compliance. The overall goal of local officials, school administrators and the courts was to effectively and efficiently deal with truancy cases, assess appropriate penalties, provide services where needed and discourage truant behavior (Beauliew, 1997).

It is unclear exactly how many youngsters who refused to go to school did so because of school phobia in particular. Refusal to attend school affected about five percent of the school-age population and contributed to many long-term psychological problems if left untreated such as: anxiety, depression, and antisocial behavior (Kearney, Eisen, & Silverman, 1995). In studies conducted regarding poor school attendance, almost half of the students' reasons for absence were health-related problems and the other half were nonhealth related issues such as attitudes toward education, dislike of school, poor relationship with teacher, laziness, and/or missing the school bus (Cohen & Fish, 1993).

Evidence of poor school attendance and its effect on academic achievement was prevalent in many settings. Truants were more likely to score below other nonattenders on measures of school achievement (Schultz, 1990). Many students were found absent on days when important tests were given. During a sample period in Miami more than 71% of 13 to 16 year olds prosecuted for criminal violations had been truant (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

In St. Louis, Missouri, a behavioral group study was done with students who exhibited a high level of unexcused absences and below average academic achievement. The data showed that the group increased attendance during the group study and maintained the level during the posttreatment. The results indicated that a behavioral group model with a positive programmed approach can increase school attendance (Waltzer, 1989).

The Twelve-Together Program in Detroit combined students for weekly peer group meetings to help tackle poor attendance and low achievement (Ianni & Orr, 1996). Daily absentee rates were as high as 30% in some cities, so officials in New Jersey were preventing truancy through programs that encouraged parents to work with schools to keep their children in class (Garry, 1996).

What the literature described about the causes of poor school attendance amongst adolescents included a variety of factors. Truancy was caused by or related to such factors as: student drug use, violence at or near school, feelings of affiliation with school and peers, lack of family support for regular attendance, emotional or mental health problems, lack of a clear path to more education, or inability to keep pace with academic requirements (Cohen & Fish, 1993). Since truancy was a stepping stone to delinquent and criminal activity, there was a strong need to look at the major gaps in the current truancy legislation and compulsory attendance laws in efforts to curtail non-school attendance (Johnson, 1998).

Summary

There were several insights which the writer gained that related specifically to the problem in her work setting. There was the common theme stated throughout the

literature with regard to the effect that parents have on a child's attendance. Parents were being held more accountable for their child's school attendance. The need for feelings of affiliation with school and peers were of concern. Absences during the primary grades often signaled a pattern that continued through adolescence, which led to dropping out of high school. There was a move from focus on early intervention to focus on prevention programs which identified and monitored students entering the middle schools.

As stated in other states, there had been an increase of juvenile crime and chronic truancy over the past few years within the writer's school district, with more than 250 youth referred to Superior Court for Juvenile Matters. The need for comprehensive responses to social problems which affected the community was a concern. Interagency collaboration with the public school system, the Youth Service Bureau, community agencies, mental health clinics, and the probation division of the Superior Court for Juvenile Matters worked together to develop programs to address local needs. The State Department of Children and Families became more involved because of concern due to parental neglect. The uses of limited resources were promoting the need for prevention/intervention programs within the schools

Truancy was a symptom of the need for supports for both student and parents. Effective programming for supports for both student and parents was explored. Since parents were ultimately responsible for ensuring their children attend school and children out of school were often difficult to engage in intervention, the child component of the community mental health clinic proposed a full-time social worker to act as family counselor.

There was a growing concern that legal intervention must occur quickly in coordination with community-based intervention. The need for creating special dockets for communities who had a court, community, and school laison had been explored. The Truancy Response Team coordinated those efforts under a grant funded by the state. This writer limited the scope of the review and focused on what she thought the possible causes of truancy were based on her work experiences and focused on issues pertaining to programs and strategies within her work setting to anticipate possible solutions.

Chapter III: Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments

Goals and Expectations

This writer's goal was to reduce the number of unexcused absences among students while increasing their academic achievement.

Expected Outcomes

The following outcomes were projected for this practicum:

1. The first outcome is the prevention of students from reaching truancy status. This will be measured by weekly attendance reports. As a demonstration of success, at least 10 of 20 students will not reach four unexcused absences in one month or 10 unexcused absences within the three-month period.
2. The second expected outcome is the desire to come to school that the students will demonstrate. This will be measured by student interviews. The writer expects 14 of 20 students to demonstrate the desire to attend school utilizing a pre/posttest interview.
3. The third expected outcome is that parents will take responsibility in reporting school absences when their child is not in school. Measurement of the outcome will be a result of phone conversations and written notices made by the parent. Attendance records will also indicate the reporting of absences. The writer expects at least 10 of the 20 parents to report school absences when their child is not in school.
4. The fourth expected outcome is the increase in student achievement. The outcome will be measured through mid-term progress reports, report cards,

and teacher observations. As a demonstration of success, academic achievement will increase to a passing level in at least four of five subjects.

Measurement of Outcomes

To identify students who had reached truancy status or were in danger of truancy, this writer used a computerized daily attendance report. A baseline of unexcused absences was established from the report. The attendance report identified any absence a student had and the reason why. It also identified if parental contact was made. The students utilized individual student contracts as a visual to monitor their attendance and choose rewards contingent upon their attendance. The attendance report offered a simple and accurate account of attendance and was also of benefit to the juvenile justice caseworker who helped in making phone contacts, home visits, and periodic rewards for the students. Contracts were designed by this writer to reward improved school attendance and also helped to monitor it (see Appendix C). The contract allowed students to suggest rewards for school attendance with no unexcused absences the first week and then every two weeks. Rewards suggested were simple, inexpensive, and readily available. They included grab bag prizes of school supplies or vouchers for french fries or Snapple from the school cafeteria. Those with no unexcused absences the last three weeks of the program were cooked breakfast by the principal.

The measurement of the students desire to come to school was identified through conversational student interviews with their counselor. The counselor recorded their responses to alleviate any inhibitions students may have had with written expression. A written pre/posttest questionnaire was administered. This instrument was utilized to compare attitudes toward coming to school before and after the group process. The

questionnaire was done independently unless the student needed help reading it. Approximately 10 minutes was needed to complete the instrument which utilized a likert scale.

A multiple-choice questionnaire was also administered during week two of implementation to elicit more specific responses to the causes of the students' absences. The purpose of this questionnaire was to promote group discussion and offer interventions for nonschool attendance if necessary (see Appendix D). A sentence completion follow-up was given at the end of the twelve weeks to purposefully wind down. The questionnaire allowed the students to discuss feelings and provide feedback on what they had experienced from the group (see Appendix E).

The measurement of parents taking responsibility in reporting school absences resulted in a record generated by the computer that records any parental contact. Also, written notes by the parent regarding their child's absence were recorded. This writer called the parent if their child was listed on the daily attendance sheet as absent/unexcused. Record of parental contact was recorded on the student's contract. Phone calls home were also made by the juvenile justice caseworker.

The duration of the group included one marking period which lent itself to academic evaluations that were already in place. The increase in student achievement was measured through mid-term progress reports that were mailed home to the parent at midpoint. Report cards, which were given to the student at the same time period of the group terminating, indicated grades, teacher observations, and attendance data.

These instruments were utilized since they were readily available, easy to implement and gave an accurate account of attendance or lack of. They also lend themselves to a behavioral peer group approach with middle school students.

Chapter IV: Solution Strategy

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

The problem solved in this practicum was that of poor school attendance. There was an increase in unexcused absences which resulted in poor academic achievement for these middle school students. Parents were irresponsible by not reporting absences and/or allowing students to stay home without legitimate reasons. Current strategies to improve attendance were ineffective since nonattendance was increasing. By eighth grade, approximately 40% of the students did not meet state goals for academic achievement.

There has been various solutions tried in communities across the nation to reduce truancy. Research indicated truancy as being a national concern and there were many studies available concerning this issue and its ramifications to society (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994).

Solutions gleaned from the literature indicated a zero tolerance for truancy. In states such as Connecticut, Delaware, and several others, there were curfews during daytime school hours that allowed law enforcement officers to question youth to determine if their absence was legitimate. In New York, a student with a certain number of unexcused absences could be failed in his or her courses. In Wisconsin, a judge ordered a truant to attend counseling or an education program designed for him or her. The majority of solutions that surrounded truancy incorporated stricter legal sanctions for the student and parent (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

The use of a behavioral group approach and group contingencies to increase attendance was stated throughout the literature. In some states peer groups formed their own courts to identify solutions. It has been found that the programs worked because they grasped the power of peer pressure (Waltzer, 1989).

The use of interventions with families utilizing a parent accountability program proved to be effective. Atlantic County, New Jersey, had a program that utilized a truancy worker that met with the youth and family to provide short-term counseling. Whenever parental participation was required within a program, which had been common throughout the research, the intervention was successful. One of the primary elements to combat truancy was parental responsibility. In states such as Maryland and Oklahoma, parents who failed to prevent truancy can be subject to formal sanction or lose eligibility for certain public assistance (Barth, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

The study of an in-school suspension program where intervention consisted of supportive instruction, counseling, biography-writing, and contingency contracting resulted in more positive attitudes toward school attendance, improved attendance, and greater insight by the students into their attendance problem. It had been found that when dealing with truancy, it was effective to demonstrate cognitively to the student what was wrong with her/his behavior and how it was counterproductive to her/his well being (Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994).

Programs that involved local law enforcement were proven to be effective. State legislatures found that linking truancy to such items as a student's grades or driver's license helped reduce the problem. In California, there was a Stop, Cite, and Return Program designed to reduce truancy by utilizing patrol officers. The officers issued

citations to suspected truants during school hours and students were returned to school to meet with their parents and vice-principal. Oklahoma State legislature enacted a tougher antitruancy law that allowed charges to be filed against parents if their children missed more than 10 consecutive days of school. Truant juveniles were then transported to a specified location after agreement with the school district (U.S. Department of Education, 1996).

Enforcement of school attendance policies that used community-run temporary detention centers where they could drop off youth rather than bring them to local police stations had been effective. Police sweeps of neighborhoods in which truant youth were often found made a difference in crime (Garry, 1996). Community-based approaches to truancy were designed to prevent the need for legal sanctions.

Lastly, it was clearly defined throughout the research that early intervention for children with poor school attendance was an effective system (Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994). In Atlantic County, New Jersey, Project Helping Hand was an early identification and intervention program that provided counseling for parents and elementary students at risk of developing chronic truancy problems. According to the director of the family counseling component, 83% of the 290 children who participated in the program experienced no need to be referred to court for truancy (Garry, 1996).

What has been noted throughout the literature was that the problem of truancy was more than just a student issue, a family issue, or a school issue. It was a complex issue that "best practices" to reduce it must encompass a multimodal approach. In order to create the most successful intervention possible, all causes of the problem needed to be considered. Every school and community needed to take steps to reduce truancy. The

steps included the active involvement of parents, educators, law enforcement, community, and social services.

As a result of the literature review, this writer began discussing strategies with colleagues and members of the Truancy Response Team who currently worked within her school district. They were the community laison to the schools, parents, and juvenile justice center. This writer was also a member on the Board for the Team who met monthly. Along with ideas generated amongst colleagues and the Truancy Team, this writer attended state conferences, heard what strategies were being used throughout the state to minimize truancy, and became aware of the legislation and its possible changes.

Solutions generated as a result of the literature review, conversations, and meetings involved strategies utilizing peer support groups. It had been noted in the research that the initiative was now to create prevention and intervention programs that promoted a peaceful learning environment to help students stay in school (Beauliew, 1997). The ideas for this type of program were stimulated by a behavioral group approach which used contingencies to reduce truancy (Waltzer, 1989). The truants were part of a personal growth group that was peer oriented and designed to provide an atmosphere of trust and support. Along with a peer group, was the establishment of a close link with the juvenile justice system that was involved as part of an interagency collaborative team within the community.

By establishing a close link with the juvenile justice system, through the Truancy Response Team, it was hoped that the parents and children took attending school more seriously. To incorporate school/parent relationships, the organization of meetings, phone contact, and home visits by the school's support staff were implemented. As a

result of this writer attending state meetings, it prompted the desire to explore neighboring communities and their role in improving school attendance.

Description of Selected Solutions

A solution this writer planned to implement to decrease the number of unexcused absences utilized a program involving peers, parents, and the community agency already involved with the school in reducing truancy. The intention of the program targeted those students who had reached truancy status with four unexcused absences and had them participate in a behavioral group program.

While participating in the group, there was continual phone contact with parents when the student was recorded as absent unexcused. The parent was asked to assume responsibility and call the school when their child was absent. They were reminded of the absences that were considered excusable and asked to send a note stating the reason for the absence upon the return of their youngster. A review of the literature revealed research that focused on an approach to truancy, which gave attention to the school's contribution and took into consideration the limits and merits of the parents. Parents of truants had been found to score significantly higher on scales of overprotectedness, overindulgence, and rejection. Children from lower-class families with many siblings had to stay at home to care for the younger children because the parents could not afford day care (Bell, Rosen & Dynlacht, 1994). Letting parents know that the school was concerned about their child's nonattendance or that their child was not at school on a given day promoted school attendance (Barth, 1994).

The influence and activities of students' peers also contributed to reducing nonattendance in schoolwide programs (Barth, 1994). When encouraged by the praise

and persuasion of peers, attendance was noted to improve. A behavioral group program that used contingencies proved to be successful. In addition, a group approach provided the opportunity to utilize the powerful forces of peer pressure in effecting change. Group reinforcement had been found to be more potent than individual reinforcement (Waltzer, 1989). The establishment of a weekly peer group fostered a more positive outlook towards school. Once students recognized that their problems were not unique and that others would help them, they became more self-confident, gained a sense of belonging, and looked to school as a "safe" place rather than another stress in their life.

The relationship between the solution strategies and projected outcomes reflected an increase in school attendance and resulted in academic achievement. Once positive feelings toward school were expressed, students were able to concentrate on their academics and achieved some degree of success. As they experienced these successes, they began to attend school on a regular basis. School then became a place where they received positive reinforcement rather than a place to vent their negative feelings or to avoid entirely (Cohen & Fish, 1993). The debate on whether nonattendance caused poor achievement or poor achievement caused nonattendance was still an issue researched throughout the literature. Increasingly, studies suggested that nonattendance contributed more to poor achievement (Barth, 1994).

Lastly, the Truancy Response Team, a community agency already involved with the school, served as a laison to the student and parent. Since truancy often indicated bigger problems in a child's life, many communities were designing truancy reduction programs that involved schools (Garry, 1996). A caseworker hired through a community grant met with students during the 12 weeks of the program and provided incentives for

them to attend school. As noted throughout the research, positive factors reduced the risk of a student becoming a truant. These factors included positive adult and peer relationships. Establishment of a Truancy Unit, which consisted of juvenile justice personnel and providers who utilized a case management approach to improving school attendance, was a needed intervention for any school system (McMahon & Pruett, 1998).

The solution of a behavioral peer group approach resulted in the desire for students to come to school, more parental responsibility, and an increase in academic achievement.

Report of Action Taken

The writer began implementation with the knowledge to initiate a peer truancy group and informed the administration, guidance counselor, the writer's colleague, and staff on the content of the sessions involved. Once the administrator was given the facts on the number of students who had reached truancy status along with the group's process, approval for implementation followed.

This writer met with the administrator, guidance counselor, and juvenile justice caseworker to review the process of implementation. During a staff meeting, this writer explained the group dynamics and the importance of the student's attendance. Since the students targeted would be meeting during homeroom, which was 25 minutes long, it was important for the homeroom teachers to administer the passes and prompt the students to arrive at the group on time. The writer also discussed with the homeroom teachers reinforcing their attendance at school. This took place over the next 12 weeks on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Since homeroom and lunch were the only two times during the

day that students could freely socialize, the group met bi-weekly as not to take away that time every day.

The first week, the writer met with the targeted students who were in danger of reaching truancy status with four unexcused absences in a month or 10 within the year. Also targeted were students who demonstrated school refusal behavior to their parents and parents then notified the school. Discussion took place regarding their attendance and the goals for them as group members. The group was reminded that the purpose of the group was "just to talk" and share their feelings and concerns. The writer explained her role and the other guidance counselor's role in offering support. At the end of the session, permission slips were given to the 20 targeted students. Students displayed a positive attitude with regard to its process. Not only was it a welcomed incentive to attend school but it also lent itself to students to get to know other students better. The first five to 10 minutes of the group was to settle in and mingle. If a student was missing, the access of phone in the media center facilitated contacting the homeroom and checking in on the students, if they were absent, forgot or were resistant to report to group. Three of 17 students had difficulty attending and wanted to stay in homeroom. Each time they came to group without prompting, much praise was given to them. Food is known to be a great motivator at this level, so juice, along with doughnuts and muffins were provided at each group session.

The following week permission slips were collected. One student notified us that she was moving, one student was not permitted to participate (her guardian did not feel it was necessary and a few weeks later went on to be home schooled), and one student who had been truant for a long period of time and was court ordered to school felt that "she

had enough to do and people to see". This writer felt that student made an insightful decision. A total of 17 students comprised the group. It was an excellent random sample of students with regard to diversity, age, and academic ability. The writer utilized warm-up and group guidelines suggested from Talk to Teens (Peterson, 1993) to facilitate a group process. Tables were arranged to form one huge square that all could fit around. Students expressed their personal concerns regarding their lack of attendance. The writer explained the significance of the attendance contract for the following 10 weeks of group. Of importance was reviewing the school's attendance policy and its' consequences as a result of non-school attendance. The group listened intently and offered suggestions for the grab bag prizes and other possible awards. The only suggestion that was not doable was earning a free period in the gym to play basketball. The administrator did not feel that was educationally sound for improved attendance since they missed so much school already. The program was well received in spite of the group's silence. It was evident that due to the various grade levels, multiple levels of ability, and most students not knowing each other, that a level of trust and comfort needed to be established before sharing their feelings or concerns. This writer then incorporated the questionnaires into the majority of the sessions. They dealt with attendance, lateness, and academic survival skills from How to study booklet (1993) and provided a level of comfort especially to the shy and high achieving students.

The next two weeks more students began to participate and discussed their reasons for not being in school prior to the group. The students were given print outs of their attendance so far for the year. They were amazed at how many days they had missed. Seeing their attendance in print brought the issue to reality for them. Discussion

was about strategies to improve their attendance. Grab bag prizes were awarded to students who had no unexcused absences the previous two weeks. Parents were notified of the group's progress so far, reminded of the importance of parental contact when their child was absent, and thanked for their support. The juvenile justice caseworker reviewed the group's progress with the writer and made morning phone calls to students who were having the most difficulty getting to school. The caseworker also saw students individually to review attendance and reinforce the group process. Positive feedback started to be elicited from the group via teachers and caseworker. Attendance records indicated improvement and more parental contact. The following week was winter recess. Stress with the students was the difficulty about returning to school after a vacation and feelings were discussed.

All students were present at school on the Monday following vacation. The following two weeks focused on academic skills. To elicit more discussion from the group on setting goals for the third marking period, students completed "What kind of a student are you?" (O'Brien, 1999). This worksheet was adapted to fit the needs of the group. Rules of the group were reinforced, contracts reviewed, french fry and Snapple vouchers were given for good attendance, and midterm progress reports discussed. The correlation of good attendance and good grades was made by the students.

The seventh and eighth week continued the discussion on attendance. Utilizing the How to study booklet students also discussed study habits that would make them successful students. Attendance continued to be reviewed with the caseworker and parents. Parents were invited to meet with the guidance counselors if they were still having difficulty getting their child to school. To reinforce the community agency

involvement with truancy for the school, students were encouraged to sign up for after school tutoring and recreational activities provided by the Truancy Response Team. Most students expressed a lack of desire for after school activities and preferred going home right after school. Activities from Social Skills: Lessons and Activities (Begun, 1996) were incorporated to enhance discussion about coming to school, doing homework, and being on time.

The last three weeks focused on improved attendance, extended the reward to three weeks instead of two and celebrated with breakfast cooked by the principal for those who had no unexcused absences. With the group nearing conclusion and students feeling apprehensive, the writer developed a specific follow-up questionnaire that would express their feelings about coming to school and what they needed to do to continue the progress they had made during the group process. This follow-up was also administered to provide closure and an opportunity to talk about what they had experienced in the group (see Appendix F). Most students expressed that they would miss the group and the people they met. As one student expressed himself, "It was like a family". The students felt the support of the group was most important and encouraged their attendance. The rewards and refreshments were also good incentives.

During the final week, the writer administered the pre/post questionnaire to the group and reviewed the attendance contracts with the students. Students were asked to list a goal that they would be working on once the group had ended. Students and parents were notified when the breakfast would take place. A final letter was sent to the parents thanking them for their support during the program and the necessity of parental contact to avoid truancy. Certificates were given to the students for participation in the group and

for those with no unexcused absences for the 10 weeks of documentation. After reflecting on the group's growth, the writer, guidance counselor, and juvenile justice caseworker proposed to implement the program as a mandatory step for those students who exhibit truancy behaviors at the beginning of the new school year and continue a group each marking period. The involvement of adults, peers, parents, and the community laison was invaluable in increasing student attendance.

The data was shared with the principal of the school. He agreed to have a group developed in the beginning of the next school year to help reduce the number of absences amongst students.

Chapter V: Results

Results

There was an increase in nonschool attendance and students failing for the year. Parents were not reporting student absences and/or allowed students to stay home without legitimate reasons. Student interviews revealed a lack of desire to come to school, and report cards were indicating failure for students with high absenteeism.

The writer's goal was to facilitate students to attend school with no unexcused absences in order to avoid court referrals for truancy and improve their academic standing. This strategy would entail parent support in reporting absences and getting their child to school. Involvement with the community juvenile justice system would promote positive connectedness to school.

The solution strategy the writer used was the implementation of a behavioral group approach to combat truancy while increasing academic achievement. Continual phone contact with parents of the students was made by the writer, guidance counselor, and juvenile justice caseworker. The bi-weekly peer group sessions utilized discussion topics that revolved around school attendance and academic achievement strategies. The use of contingencies proved to be successful.

The first expected outcome stated is the prevention of students from reaching truancy status. This was measured by weekly attendance reports. As a demonstration of success, at least 10 of 20 students would not reach four unexcused absences in one month or 10 unexcused absences within the twelve-week period.

This outcome was met.

The baseline data showed that the 10 weeks prior to the group's intervention there was an "average" of nine unexcused absences per week of the 17 targeted students that participated in the group (see Figure 1). Post-implementation data indicated that unexcused absences significantly declined each week during the group process.

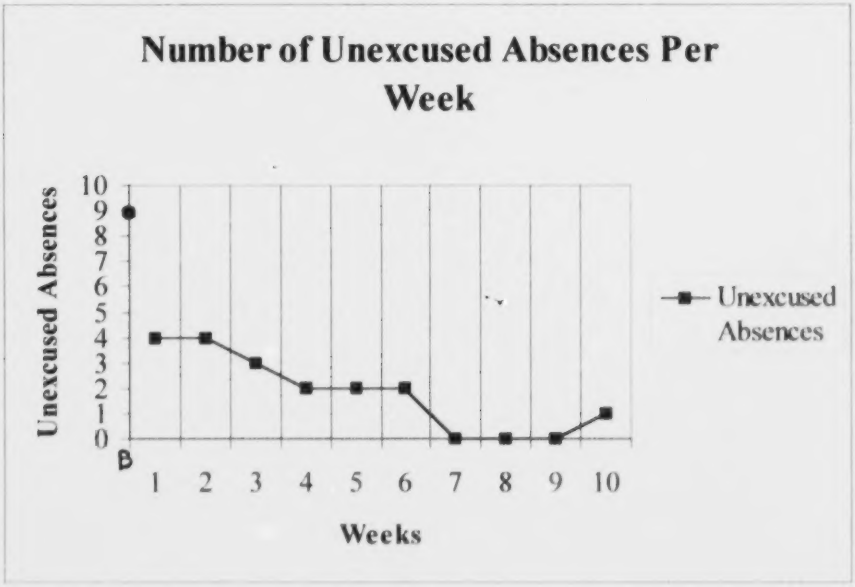

Figure 1

The second expected outcome was the desire to come to school that the students would demonstrate. This was measured by student interviews. The writer expected 14 of 20 students to demonstrate the desire to attend school utilizing a pre/posttest questionnaire.

The outcome was met.

On the posttest questionnaire, which was given during the last week of the group, at least 14 of 17 students who completed the pre/posttest indicated a favorable response toward school attendance on each question (see Table 1). In particular, "on question # 2 looking forward to coming to school, all 17 students indicated a positive response."

Table 1

Differences in Responses to Student Pre/Posttest Attitude Questionnaire

Question	Pre Test			Post Test		
	A	S	N	A	S	N
1. It is important that I come to school.	9	7	1	13	4	0
2. Each morning I look forward to coming to school.	4	6	7	3	13	1
3. School is a good place for making friends.	8	7	2	7	10	0
4. I feel like I have friends in school.	9	5	3	12	4	1
5. Students in school are very unfriendly to me.	0	5	12	2	4	11
6. People care if I am in school.	9	6	2	9	8	0
7. Teachers care about my progress.	14	2	1	12	4	1
8. Teachers call on me to answer questions in class.	4	11	2	5	11	1
9. Students in school are friendly to me.	10	6	1	11	6	0
10. It is worthwhile to take part in class trips.	8	8	1	6	11	0
11. I like to participate in after school activities.	3	10	4	1	11	5

Note. Responses indicate choices given to students. A = Always. S = Sometimes.

N = Never.

The third expected outcome stated that parents would take responsibility in reporting school absences when their child was not in school. Measurement of the outcome would be a result of phone conversations and written notices made by the parent. Attendance records would indicate the reporting of absences. The writer expected at least 10 of 20 parents to report school absences when their child is not in school.

This outcome was met.

Since the beginning of the school year, prior to the program, eight of 20 parents failed to report an absence when their child did not attend school. Seventeen students ended up participating in the program. During the first two weeks of the program, 12 of 17 parents reported an absence either by phone or medical note (see Figure 2). After the fifth week, attendance improved and so did parental contact with 15 of 17 parents having reported an absence. Week nine had a significant increase in absences due to two students having an illness and one student out for surgery. Although contact continued to be made each time a student was recorded absent/unexcused; two parents still failed to notify the school when their child was absent.

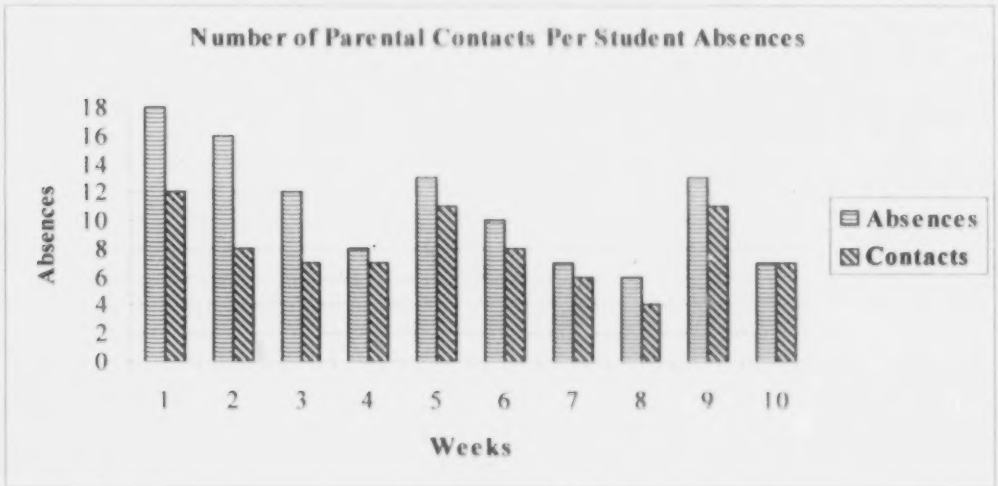

Figure 2

The fourth expected outcome was the increase in student achievement. The outcome would be measured through mid-term progress reports, report cards, and teacher observations. As a demonstration of success, academic achievement would increase to a passing level in at least four of five subjects for at least 16 of 20 students.

The outcome was met.

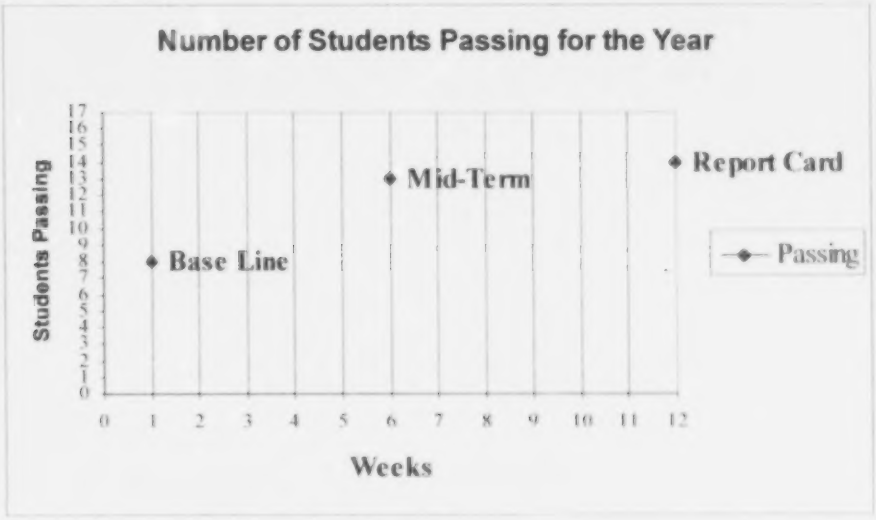

Figure 3

Prior to the peer group, 12 of the targeted 20 students were failing at least two of five academic classes which placed them in the position of failing for the year. Seventeen of the students participated in the group, which 9 of the 17 were failing for the year at the onset of the program (see Figure 3). The outcome was met by the fifth week of the program, at the time of mid-term reports, when only four students were failing for the year. By the end of the twelfth week, the third marking period report card indicated only three of 17 students failing for the year. Therefore, increased attendance paired with a behavioral group approach helped to foster the academic growth of the students.

Discussion

As projected, the outcomes for the group were met. Positive feedback from the group, parents, and staff members revealed what has been noted in research as the power of a group process for middle school students and the involvement of adults in their lives in order to overcome boundaries and achieve success (Barth, 1994; Reglin, 1997; Schultz, 1990). Receiving rewards for their attendance showed them that their efforts were not going unnoticed and provided that little extra to keep the motivation alive. Recognizing students for good attendance sends students the message that their school wants them to be there and cares enough about them to recognize them for coming to school (Johns & Keenan, 1997). These beliefs were reflected in the student's post questionnaire. Although research Dev (1997) has noted that behavior tends to regress when extrinsic motivation ceases, this writer, along with other staff members involved with the program, have concluded that it was the power of the group that intrinsically promoted attendance. The question of maintenance following termination of a reinforcement program remains although social reinforcement alone has been shown to be effective with middle school students (Schultz, 1990). It is hoped that with the students improved self-esteem, they will continue the desire to attend school.

As a result of the program it became evident that of utmost importance was parental contact. An important factor in an intervention program would entail having the school's attendance policy and consequences for unexcused absences clearly stated and consistently enforced (Bell, Rosen, & Dynlacht, 1994). Letting parents know that the school was concerned about their child's nonattendance and making immediate contact promoted attendance (Barth, 1994; Johns & Keenan, 1997). Prior to the group, several parents were shielding their children from the consequences of unauthorized absence by

excusing them when no valid reason existed. Many parents wanted help but didn't now how to go about obtaining it. Once contact and support was given and parents were informed of a possible a court referral if the absences continued improvement was noted. The extent of the student's nonattendance was assessed and if needed the involvement of the juvenile caseworker was initiated. The worker would contact the parent, make a home visit, and meet on a weekly basis with the student at school. This intervention was met with much success.

After completion of the multiple choice questionnaire that further asked the students reasons why it was difficult to attend school, illness was indicated by half of the students, then homework and tests. This coincided with some of the findings done by Cohen & Fish (1993). Students indicated that the longer they were absent the harder it was for them to make up assignments. Typically they were not students who enjoyed staying after school for activities, especially schoolwork. Studies continue to debate whether nonattendance causes poor achievement or poor achievement causes nonattendance. Increasingly research suggests that regular attendees are more likely to pass regardless of their achievement scores, therefore; nonattendance contributes more to poor achievement (Barth, 1994). This writer would agree with the research done by Barth because of the results indicated post program implementation.

Summary

The results appeared to indicate that a behavioral group approach and group contingencies paired with a community partnership can increase attendance of habitual absentees. A favorable response of the educational staff to a peer group approach in combating truancy indicates that further research along those lines are warranted. In addition to increased attendance, students were able to see the connection to school

through an improvement in grades and peer support. With increased use of peer group work in middle school settings, it would be logical to explore the implementation of a behavioral group model to improve attendance. The sessions are not difficult to replicate and offer the flexibility to incorporate variations of professional and leadership styles. Most important, this approach appears to have the effectiveness needed in a most difficult adolescent issue.

Recommendations

Schools with similar situations and populations should implement a multimodal approach which includes peers, parent, school, and community to combat truancy. In this manner all causes of the problem can be assessed and treated. When students start inexcusably missing school, they are telling their parents, school staff, and the community that they are in need of help. Educators cannot ignore these signs.

Second, the implementation of parenting classes should be a component, possibly mandatory, for parents of students having difficulty coming to school. Parents need to be held more accountable for their child's attendance. Incentives can be given at the end of each class as a means of recognizing the parents' efforts.

Third, in an effort to improve school attendance, students need to be recognized for it. Schools must reinforce that behavior. Implementation can be through a behavioral peer group, monthly pizza parties for perfect attendance, awarding coupons for fast food restaurants, etc. There are many suggestions in the literature regarding school attendance that are easy to adapt to any population (Johns & Keenan, 1997). Food has proven to be a successful reinforcer with adolescents.

This writer will further her solution within the work setting by continuing with peer groups to prevent students from reaching truancy status. This approach will help

reduce the number of students referred to court which is a time consuming process for the school and parent and provide the connectedness needed for students. A component of the program to expand would be to involve the administration and teachers more in rewarding and promoting the students' academic progress and increased attendance. The performance of teachers and their interaction with students can also encourage or discourage attendance (Barth, 1994). As reflected in student responses during the group's sessions, much of their anxiety about coming to school is due to teacher's attitudes toward them, especially after a long period of absence, homework and tests. Another advantage of getting administrators and teachers involved would be to encourage students to take part in the after school tutoring that is offered and provide reinforcement for their efforts. Teacher observations and feedback on academic performance would give a comprehensive picture of the effects of increased attendance.

Dissemination

Practicum results will be shared with administration, faculty, and the Truancy Response Team. Networking with the partner middle school will enable them to duplicate the program in their setting. This writer will be submitting the program's description and outcomes to the State Department of Education for possible selection of published material for a booklet entitled Doing what's right in the middle.

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APPENDIX A
(Interview Questions)

The following open-ended questions are asked directly to the student by the counselor when he/she reaches truancy status with four or more unexcused absences.

1. What is the main reason for you to miss school?
2. Tell some other reasons that contribute to your absences?

APPENDIX B

(Pre-Post Test/ Questionnaire)

Name_____

Grade_____ Date_____

Directions: For each statement, circle what best expresses how you feel.

1. IT IS IMPORTANT THAT I COME TO SCHOOL.
   Always Sometimes Never
2. EACH MORNING I LOOK FORWARD TO COMING TO SCHOOL.
   Always Sometimes Never
3. SCHOOL IS A GOOD PLACE FOR MAKING FRIENDS.
   Always Sometimes Never
4. I FEEL LIKE I HAVE FRIENDS IN SCHOOL.
   Always Sometimes Never
5. STUDENTS IN SCHOOL ARE UNFRIENDLY TO ME.
   Always Sometimes Never
6. FRIENDS CARE IF I AM AT SCHOOL.
   Always Sometimes Never
7. TEACHERS CARE ABOUT MY PROGRESS.
   Always Sometimes Never
8. TEACHERS CALL ON ME TO ANSWER QUESTIONS IN CLASS WHEN MY HAND IS RAISED.
   Always Sometimes Never
9. STUDENTS IN SCHOOL ARE FRIENDLY TO ME.
   Always Sometimes Never
10. IT IS WORTHWHILE TO TAKE PART IN CLASS TRIPS.
    Always Sometimes Never
11. I LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES.
    Always Sometimes Never

APPENDIX C

(Student Contract)

STUDENT CONTRACT: ATTENDANCE

I Know I can: **[Goal]**_____

If I (attend with no unexcused absences for two weeks)

_____

then
[Results]___(reward)_____

WEEKLY RECORD

WEEK #	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					

Student Signature_____ date_____

APPENDIX D

Name_____Date_____

Please circle the choice(s) that best tells how you feel. Check N/A if the question does not apply to you.

1. At home, what makes it difficult for you to come to school?
   a. your parent needs you
   b. you have to baby-sit
   c. no one wakes you up
   d. miss the bus
   e. wake up late
   f. N/A
   g. Other

2. If you were late a lot, what would help you to get to school on time?
   a. alarm clock
   b. parent is home
   c. phone call from a friend
   d. being able to take the bus
   e. N/A
   f. Other

3. At school, what makes it difficult for you to want to attend?
   a. homework
   b. tests
   c. friends
   d. teacher(s)
   e. illness
   f. N/A
   g. Other

4. I am not achieving to my ability in school due to the following reason(s).
   a. home issues
   b. attendance
   c. new to Bailey
   d. friends
   e. incidents that happen in school

f. school is not important to me
g. not studying enough
h. suspensions
i. being late
j. homework
k. have difficulty learning

5. How confident are you that you could do better in school if you tried?
   a. very confident
   b. confident
   c. somewhat confident
   d. not confident

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND THOUGHTS.

APPENDIX E

(GROUP FOLLOW-UP)

Complete these sentences with words or phrases.

Name_____ Date_____

1. As I leave this group, I feel good that _____

_____

2. I hope that I _____

_____

3. Someone in the group I'm glad I know better is _____

_____

4. Something important that I learned was _____

_____

5. I feel more aware of _____

_____

6. I learned that others _____

_____

7. I was surprised that_____

_____

8. I will probably always remember_____

_____

9. I am glad that I _____

_____

10. My goal for the fourth marking period is _____

_____